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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001177

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [YM](#) [SA](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI ARABIA: JINDAN TALKS KAUST, REFORM, AND  
REGIONAL POLITICS

REF: A. RIYADH 1086

[1](#)B. RIYADH 1154

Classified By: CDA Ambassador Richard Erdman for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)  
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SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) During Charge Ambassador Erdman's September 8 farewell call, Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister for Bilateral Affairs Ambassador Khalid Al-Jindan admitted that oil wealth could no longer solve all the Kingdom's problems, and that the time had come for reforms; voiced qualified support for an increased role for women in Saudi society but said the west must be patient; and encouraged the U.S. to exert its influence on Iraqi PM Maliki to help defuse escalating Iraqi-Syrian tensions. In addition, he thanked Charge for his work in the Kingdom, saying his presence came at "an important time" and had helped strengthen the Saudi-American relationship. END SUMMARY.

OIL WEALTH ALONE NO LONGER ENOUGH

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[1](#)2. (C) Jindan thanked Charge for his visit, adding that he was sorry to see him leave before the KAUST University inauguration on September 23. Charge mentioned his recent trip to the facility in Jeddah, noting KAUST was a "visionary project" and a testament to King Abdullah's recognition that Saudi Arabia needed to prepare itself for a future when the country would need to depend on its human resources, rather than its oil. "It is good to see this happening," Jindan agreed, noting that while the Saudis had once believed oil wealth would solve all their problems, they now realized this was no longer enough. "Many shocking things have happened," he conceded, "that have made us wake up and concern ourselves with things other than oil." It was important that Saudi society reform, he said, so that it as able to face up to these new challenges.

CHANGE WILL COME, WITH PATIENCE

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[1](#)3. (C) Charge observed that it would be difficult for Saudi Arabia to compete in this new environment if it continued to exclude 50% of the population (i.e. women) from full participation in economic and political life. In the knowledge-based economy of the future, the Kingdom could not hope to be competitive if it deprived itself of the intellectual talents and contributions of half its citizens. Change itself was not the issue, he continued, since it is the law of life. The only real issue is how best to accommodate change in a way that protects the core, defining values of one's society.

[1](#)4. (C) Referring to his recent conversation with Justice Minister Al-Issa (ref A), Charge noted that most people

seemed to agree that the restrictions on women's freedom stemmed from custom rather than the Qur'an or Shari'a law. Given Shari'a concepts of the equality and dignity of all individuals in the eyes of God, allowing custom to trump law was in effect putting man ahead of God. That clearly wasn't Islam. Why not use the concept of equality in Shari'a law to change custom, rather than vice versa?, Charge asked. Jindan acknowledged that Shari'a law embodied concepts of equality and dignity of all individuals before God, and allowed for an active role for women in society. However, customs were "a hard nut to crack." "Even Mohammed had to struggle with customs," he continued, adding that it had taken a long time for the role of women in Europe and the U.S. to change and evolve. The same would be true for Saudi Arabia, he concluded.

#### SHARED VIEWS ON YEMEN

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15. (C) Jindan asked Charge about the recent visit to the Kingdom and Yemen by the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Brennan. Charge said discussions here had underscored our shared sense of concern for the challenges facing Yemen -- Al-Qaeda, the Houthis, and separatist tendencies in the South. Both countries agreed that what happened in Yemen was of critical importance to regional security, and that we needed to help Yemen if it was to be able to address these challenges. "Iranian infiltration was also a problem," Jindan quickly added, repeating an oft-heard but still unproven allegation of direct Iranian support for the Houthis. Charge said that

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while we did not rule this out, we still had not seen any hard evidence of material, as opposed to political, involvement on the Iranian side.

#### MALIKI COULD BE LESS PROVOCATIVE

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16. (C) During the discussion of the upcoming Arab League ministerial, reported septel, Jindan claimed that there had been "no regression" in Saudi-Iraqi bilateral relations and that the Kingdom was still planning to send an Ambassador "immediately" when the security situation improved. However recent events, notably the escalation with Syria, were worrying. Charge reiterated the importance of a strong Arab diplomatic presence in Iraq, which would help ensure it remained firmly anchored in the Arab world. Jindan concurred that Iraq's stability was of paramount interest to Saudi Arabia, and suggested the U.S. could do more to dissuade Iraqi PM Maliki from antagonizing his neighbors. "Perhaps you can convince him to be less provocative, and show more self restraint," Maliki offered. Charge told Jindan we had been urging the Iraqis to reach out to their neighbors to resolve outstanding differences but, speaking personally, was not optimistic much would happen before the January 2010 elections.

#### A NEW PAGE IN LEBANON

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17. (C) After a discussion of his recent meeting with Culture Minister Khoja (ref B), Charge reiterated that the U.S. had made it clear to Syria that improvements in the bilateral relationship were contingent on improved Syrian behavior vis-a-vis BOTH Iraq and Lebanon. Jindan noted that the new Saudi Ambassador to Syria had recently arrived in Damascus, and that this was intended as a signal that the Saudis were "ready to start a new page...provided the Syrians are willing to do so."

STRENGTHENED U.S.- SAUDI RELATIONS

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18. (C) Charge expressed appreciation for the opportunity to serve in the Kingdom and wish to continue his positive working relationship with Saudi officials during his upcoming assignment as Senior Advisor for the Middle East with our UN Mission for the General Assembly. "Your presence at an important time was helpful," Jindan said. "It helped strengthen the Saudi-American relationship, and will make the work of your new Ambassador easier." He added, "I hope you will keep Saudi Arabia in your mind." Charge assured him he would.

ERDMAN